

# BOUNDLESS WAY Z

Dharma talks, sermons  
and teishos

## ***SEEING WITH THE EYE WITH WHICH GOD SEES***

*A Dharma Talk adapted from a  
Unitarian Universalist Sermon*

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### **Text**

*And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong  
wind rent the mountains, and broke the rocks in pieces  
before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and  
after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the  
earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord  
was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice.*

I Kings

19:11-12

The spiritual quest is complex, no doubt. I'm reminded of Woody Allen's complaint about how he was flunked out of college for cheating on his metaphysics exam. Appears he looked within the soul of the boy sitting next to him. I understand the confusion that can happen in real life. Where do we look on the spiritual quest? How do we look? And what is it exactly we're actually looking for? These questions

What is it exactly we're actually looking for? These questions have burned in my heart all of my life.

It was nineteen sixty-eight. I was obsessed with finding the truth, you know, capital "T" truth. I was on fire with desire for spiritual insight. I'd rejected my childhood Baptist religion, and with that, Christianity. I was certain God didn't exist, although I still prayed, if screaming and yelling my frustrations and longing into the void is praying. My principal prayer at the time was an offer of a deal. If God existed, and would reveal himself, herself, itself; I was totally willing to die in the next moment. I prayed that prayer a lot. All I got back was silence; a deafening, horrible, silence.

I cast about the spiritual marketplace to find my way. There certainly was a lot to find in the San Francisco Bay Area at the tail end of the nineteen sixties. I heard various spiritual guides hold forth, ranging from the Sikh Yogi Bhajan to the Hippie guru Stephen Gaskin to the Sufi sheikh Samuel Lewis to the Tibetan lamas Tarthang Tulku and Chogyam Trungpa. I briefly attended services at the Vedanta Society in Berkeley. I read the siren call of Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary, and tried following their advice. I don't regret it, but neither can I recommend it. In fact nothing answered my prayer. I was not quite twenty years old and at my spiritual wit's end.

Along the way people kept mentioning this Japanese priest across the bay from Oakland, where I lived. Shunryu Suzuki led something called the San Francisco Zen Center. And he was a roshi, which I was told by my friends meant something along the lines of "old fart," or, perhaps "venerable fart." My friends weren't completely reliable informants, so I wasn't sure that even in Zen which is notoriously iconoclastic that they went in for such totally fanciful titles. Whatever the title translated as, Suzuki was a roshi and that meant he was supposed to be a Zen master.

Finally, one Saturday I went over to the center in San Francisco and did their morning introduction to Zen practice

San Francisco and did their morning introduction to Zen practice. The instructor was one of Suzuki Roshi's senior students, a man named Claude Dalenberg. Two asides: First, Claude is the character Bud Duchendorf in Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, if you've read that novel. I'd read it, but it was years later that I learned the Bud/Claude connection. And, second, some years after this incident when the popular spiritual writer Alan Watts wrote his autobiography, *In My Own Way*, he recounted an incident that happened after he had been appointed to the faculty of the American Academy of Asian Studies. In it he overheard a visitor with a burning spiritual question asking after Dr Watts who was told with a question that important you'd be better off speaking to the janitor. The janitor was Claude Dalenberg.

Claude was the person who first introduced me to Zen.

He taught our little class a practice called breath counting, where you put a number on your inhalation, "one," then another your exhalation, "two," and so on until you get to ten. You then do it again. But at the end of his twenty minute presentation Claude said actually the shorter version of Zen meditation instruction is just sit down, shut up and pay attention. He paused, looked at us poor hippie spiritual vagabonds and added silence can teach you a lot. Then, after a brief formal interview with a Japanese Zen priest, Danin Katagiri Sensei, I found myself sitting on a small black pillow facing a white wall about three feet from my nose. Sit down. Shut up. Pay attention.

I was cast into the noise of my head. Silence? What silence?

Sit down. Shut up. Pay attention.

Let's unpack this a bit and explore some of the ways we can most profitably engage a practice of presence, of silence.

First that "sit down." I suggest the spirit of this direction has

more to do with intention than with posture. The thirteenth century Japanese Buddhist monk and general all around deep thinker Eihei Dogen suggested the formal meditation posture used by the Buddha is enlightenment. Not a symbol, not a pointer, but actually enlightenment. Some who follow Dogen's teachings literally, and he is a very important authority, have taken this to mean if you can't sit in the full lotus cross-legged on the floor, with the backs of your feet resting on your thighs, and your back upright, you can't achieve awakening. I don't believe this is what Dogen means.

Rather we're being given a hint, a wink, and an invitation. Out of my nearly forty years of trying on this practice in its various forms, I suggest if we set our intention directly on this project of "sit down" to find the great silence, to be open to its lessons, to wait upon, as Elijah finds in 1 Kings, that "still small voice" which is the Lord, then precisely how we place our bodies is vastly less important than simply noticing how we place our bodies.

These days, with arthritis and bone spurs, and general rising decrepitude, my sitting is mostly done in a chair. Here's the deal. Sitting down, standing up, or walking; all work, all fit the heart of the phrase "sit down." If, that is, we attend. Yes, there are postures that are probably more helpful than others. I'm pretty confident of that. Traditionally sitting and walking are considered less inclined to unnecessary distraction than, say, lying down. Some people on Zen meditation retreats due to various physical ailments are forced to do the practice lying down. And it's not uncommon, particularly in the long afternoon periods, to hear people doing their practice lying down, snoring. But sometimes if you want to do this practice of silence, lying down is what you have to do. And if lying down is what you must do, do it. However you place your body, sitting, walking or lying down, setting a space apart, mainly by setting a time apart, say five, ten, twenty or forty minutes, consciously devoted to the practice, well then, I suggest, you've really, truly, "sat down."

Now, for that “shut up.” There are those who teach meditation who advise us to stop thinking. Like being told to “sit down,” shutting up or stopping thinking is something which needs a little unpacking. Our brains throw off thoughts like the skin throws off sweat. The only way to literally stop thinking is to die. But just like Dogen’s advice to own our enlightenment in our bodies, here we can discover ways to not be dragged off by every thought or feeling that rises, and in that process discover some very important things about ourselves.

One of the astonishing things about our minds is how we can see it function. This ability to both do something and witness the doing is a very rich thing. We can watch our thoughts. If, that is, we’re just a little disciplined about it. So, a thought rises. Notice it, but don’t indulge it. Sometimes it’s helpful to name the thought for its category. It turns out we follow patterns in our thoughts. Some of us tend to be angry, others grasping. Actually we all have all the thoughts, but like to lead with one or another. So, the thought rises, I notice it and silently note “resentful thought.” And let it go.

Or, if you’re a deep end of the pool sort of person, just notice and let go, like catching a big fat Rainbow trout and releasing it back into the stream. Shutting up allows the trout, it allows the boat, it allows the river, it allows you. But nothing claims center stage. Here we begin to discover what is without choosing this and rejecting that. This is the heart of shutting up.

Yes, there are times when we have to choose. Is it eggs for breakfast or cereal? Or, more important decisions, life and death decisions. They’re here, too. But, I suggest, if we allow ourselves these moments of silence, of not choosing this or that, then when the time rolls around and we have to make a real decision, we’re less likely to be caught, hooked on some unconscious urge or need, and more likely to be making a healthy decision. Over time by being quiet and present we

learn a great deal about ourselves.

Frankly, if that were all there were to this, I suspect it would be worth the trouble. But silence is actually about something more than psychological maturity. In order to pay attention we need to learn a bit of silence. It is worth noting how one of the greatest of Christian mystics John of the Cross taught "silence is God's first language." I suggest a connection. Unitarian Universalist Mary Oliver once observed "I don't know exactly what a prayer is, I do know how to pay attention." We're onto something here, I believe. Willy Loman's wife, Linda, in *Death of a Salesman* cries out "Attention must be paid."

Attention: to our losses, our hurts, our longings, our dreams, our failures, our successes. The big, the middling, the small, all deserve our attention. All wander onto the stage that is life, play their parts, and then retire from the boards. Within silence we begin to see this and can meet it all with grace and compassion. Something magical happens as silence, attention and prayer meet. All of a sudden we find ourselves on sacred territory, here freedom and necessity join, or, perhaps each falls away; then in a heart beat our perspective shifts, from ego-centered, to God-centered. I hope this doesn't seem too vast a leap, but I can only struggle to find the words to witness to my journey, and I know from endless testimony, of our journey.

Here in the midst of true silence we, who have been given God's eyes, must see, have been given God's ears, must listen, must smell, must touch, must taste, must think. And from here we find how to act within the great dance of life and death. For me, it's at this instance an answer to an ancient prayer that has haunted my entire life begins to show its contours.

That's the invitation for all of us.

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